

IRETEBA PEAKS WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 14,994 acres

The Ireteba Peaks Wilderness Study Area (WSA) (NV-050-438) is located south of the old mining town of Nelson in Clark County, Nevada, approximately one hour's drive south of Las Vegas, Nevada. The study area contains approximately 14,994 acres of public land.

The northern boundary of the study area is the south edge of a powerline right-of-way. A common boundary with the Lake Mead National Recreation Area (LMNRA) is the east boundary. The western and southern boundaries follow along the base of the mountain and a drainage.

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

0 acres recommended for wilderness

14,994 acres recommended for nonwilderness

The recommendation is to not designate this WSA as wilderness, but to release the area for uses other than wilderness. It is based upon a determination of potential resource conflicts, manageability concerns and the fact that the area possessing the highest wilderness values would not be of a sufficient size to stand alone as wilderness without designation of the contiguous LMNRA lands. Restoring the lands to multiple resource management would allow for future reconsideration, under Section 202 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, of this area as a portion of the much larger area within the LMNRA, should the National Park Service (NPS) recommend that area for wilderness designation.

Wilderness values, intrinsic to the Ireteba Peaks WSA, are centered along the narrow ridgeline and canyons on the east face of the mountains. This core area is only about four miles long and a mile wide. Canyons on the east slope, although relatively deep, are very short and offer limited wilderness experiences. Due to the rugged character of the small portion of the study area possessing the highest wilderness values, most hiking and primitive recreational use would be centered on the narrow ridge or in one canyon along the northern portion of the study area and extending onto the broad open bajada of the LMNRA. The western face is distinctly lacking in wilderness values due to the relatively steep slopes dropping quickly into the bajada.

The El Dorado Mining District is adjacent to the northern portion of the WSA. Designation of the WSA as wilderness could significantly impact future development of mineral resources and exploration within an area with proven mineral resource potential. BLM concurred with the State of Nevada that the highest and best use for this area is mineral development. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in development of mining claims around the St. Louis Mine in the southwest portion of the study area. Development of the Rockefeller Mine on the southeast side of the study area, and expansion of mineral development at the Aztec Mine near the northeast boundary of the study area, would significantly impair wilderness values in the northeast, southwest, and southeast portions of the WSA and detract from solitude and wilderness experience over a relatively large area. The combined affects of these external activities would be a significant impact to wilderness.

Much of the eastern portion of the WSA, and the broad open bajada on the southern flanks of the WSA affords easy and unrestricted off-highway vehicle (OHV) access to the core of the WSA, from the Rockefeller Mine and the powerline road to the north. Although delineation of the boundary would be relatively easy on the west and north edge of the study area, identification of a recognizable boundary on the south and implementation of a vehicle closure would be nearly impossible, due to a distinct lack of clearly identifiable natural features to be used in developing a manageable boundary.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The majority of the Ireteba Peaks WSA is in a natural condition and generally lacks any internal influence of the presence of man. In an area of nearly 15,000 acres, the only man-made intrusion within the study area is a short way less than one-half mile in length. This feature is primarily visible from within its immediate vicinity. External activities having a limited impact on the WSA, within the immediate viewshed of the activity, are the Rockefeller Mine (one-half mile from the southeast edge of the study area), the St. Louis Mine (an inactive mine one-quarter mile west of the southwest corner of the WSA), and the powerline on the north boundary. Topographic screening lessens the impact of these external activities.

B. Solitude: Adequate opportunities for solitude are available throughout the WSA due to the size and configuration of the area. The east side of the study area offers outstanding opportunities for solitude in the numerous, deep, narrow canyons, and extremely rugged terrain. Vegetative screening is generally limited. Opportunities for solitude are available on the west side of the WSA, however, activities external to the study area would diminish the quality and opportunity for solitude.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Recreational opportunities in the WSA are good and quite varied. Most recreational use would be concentrated in the granite boulders on the north end of the study area, along the knifelike ridge and in the narrow canyons on the eastern flank of the Ireteba Mountains. Hiking and backpacking opportunities would most likely be concentrated in the canyons leading into the LMNRA or on the peaks and ridges offering spectacular views of Lake Mojave, the Colorado River and into Arizona.

Wildlife related recreational activities such as bird watching, nature studies, photography, and hunting are available in the WSA. Desert wildlife, including desert tortoise, bighorn sheep and wild burros, can be seen. Herds of wild burros are also found in the area. Colorful landscapes, diverse geologic formations and outstanding scenic vistas provide excellent subject matter for photography. Populations of bighorn sheep and Gambel's quail make the WSA attractive to hunters.

D. Special Features: The WSA contains several supplemental values, not the least of which is its proximity to the LMNRA. Broad, uninterrupted vistas across the LMNRA and the Colorado River into Arizona are spectacular from the ridges and peaks in the WSA. Unique geologic features enhance scenic qualities of the study area.

Desert tortoise are found in the southern and western portions of the study area. The desert tortoise (Gopherus agassizii) was listed as a threatened species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) on April 2, 1990. A total of 1,800 acres of the study area have been identified as tortoise habitat.

Ecologically, the area supports populations of Gambel's quail, bighorn sheep and wild burros. Two sensitive plant species (*Penstemon bicolor* ssp. *bicolor* and *Penstemon bicolor* ssp. *roseus*) have been identified in the study area.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The WSA is capable of being managed as wilderness, however, there would be some concerns associated with OHV management along the northern edge of the study area, and access for mineral development on the southern end. Much of the study area lacks physical barriers for OHV travel and the potential for this form of recreational activity is high, particularly in the southern and eastern portions.

The WSA is contiguous along its eastern boundary to the LMNRA. The LMNRA Final Environmental Impact Statement-General Management Plan (GMP) released in July, 1986 identified these lands as meeting the criteria of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

Approximately six percent (900 acres) of the WSA is considered to have moderate favorability for the occurrence of metallic minerals; the remaining portion is considered to have low favorability. The WSA is classified as having low favorability for non-metallic minerals and moderate favorability for the occurrence of uranium. There are no known deposits of these resources in the study area. The entire WSA has a low favorability for the occurrence of sand and gravel. No material sites occur within the study area at present. There are no known oil and gas or geothermal deposits in the WSA.

The El Dorado Mining District is near the north end of the WSA and the Searchlight Mining District is adjacent to the southern end. The area to the north of the WSA was actively mined in the late 1800's up to 1942. Significant amounts of gold, silver, and copper were produced within the mining district in the first half of the century. There are no mining claims or oil and gas leases located within the WSA.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA SPECIFIC COMMENTS

Two public hearings were held during the public review period on the Draft EIS. The first was in Las Vegas, Nevada, on August 3, 1988. Oral statements were presented by 22 people. Six oral statements were presented at the second hearing at Reno, Nevada on August 4, 1988. One of the oral comments supported the preferred alternative (no wilderness) for the study area. The other comments did not specifically mention the WSA, but, generally opposed wilderness from the position of restricting personal rights and unknown mineral potential.

Of the 35 written comments, five commentors supported the preferred alternative not to designate the area wilderness. Two of the five comments also identified the option for a modified partial wilderness alternative for the east portion of the study area not accessible to OHVs. Two comments supported a modified partial wilderness alternative that would include the east side of the WSA (9,570 acres) and the upper portion of the drainage system into the LMNRA proposed wilderness area. The subjects of the comments opposed to wilderness designation centered upon unknown wilderness potential and historic OHV use of the area.

No comments were received from Clark County.

The Governor's consensus review of the recommendation for this study area was included in a letter from the Clearinghouse of the State of Nevada, dated September 7, 1988, the Director of the Clearinghouse said, "...the State concurs with the recommendation presented in the document." The document referred to is the Draft Nevada Contiguous Lands Wilderness EIS and the recommendation is to release the entire WSA for uses other than wilderness. Comments from other state agencies also concurred with the recommendation.

There were no comments received from Federal agencies specifically directed towards this study area and none took a position on the recommendation for any WSA. The Environmental Protection Agency referred to mineral potential in all WSAs without rendering a statement or position on wilderness designation. The NPS mentioned unknown cultural resources as a reason for recommending the area for wilderness designation. The FWS identified wilderness designation as a method of protecting the threatened desert tortoise. Bureau of Mines comments were not specific.